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PASSIVE NOISE

Abstract This paper aims to establish a distinction and relationship between two types of noise – *active noise* and *passive noise* – while giving emphasis to the latter. Active noise is the discourse of negativity and violence that some theorists associate with noise's materiality, an association particularly pronounced in engagements with Japanoise. The problem with this discourse is that it relies on a culturally normative understanding of noise as well as novelty. This narrative inevitably leads to a dead end. Noise, and artistic practices like Japanoise that draw on noise sounds, have a short lifespan if their entire purpose is one of shock and disturbance. However, Japanoise is not dead: it persists both as a genre and as a sonic idea/gesture. This article suggests that noise persists, and Japanoise remains relevant, because it comes from a region not exhausted by categories of negativity and violence. This article will show how underneath active noise there resounds a deeper, more profound a-cultural noise. Drawing on Maurice Blanchot's account of passivity, which names the anarchic region of absence in his thought, this noise will be described as passive noise. In this context, passivity must be understood differently from the conventional sense as something opposed to activity. Likewise, passive noise does not refer to background noise. Instead, passive noise will be described as the interiority of excess that manifests as a breach in the closure of active noise. This breach will be shown to be consistent with Blanchot's view of the inexhaustibility of art and will be described, specifically in the context of Japanoise, as the intimacy of excess that is the lifeblood of maximalist forms of noise-making. This will also amount to a reconsideration of the idea of transgression by reframing Japanoise in terms of inertia.

Keywords noise; passivity; Japanoise; transgression; Blanchot

the end of noise?

When considering the nature and significance of noise music, it is important to acknowledge the variance of what has been classified as noise music and what is meant by noise music in the current discussion. For Paul Hegarty – who documents the history of the relationship between noise and music in his text *Noise/Music: A History* – it only makes sense to speak of noise music as genre when Japanoise[1] arrives on the scene. This is not to say that prior to the emergence of Japanoise, noise was not a significant part of music. On the contrary (and this is a crucial part of the history that Hegarty traces) noise has historically been a key component of music. Industrial music, rock, electronic, free jazz, punk, doom, atonal music and hip hop all share an intimate relationship with noise; thinking about the nature of these noises, how they vary and how they might be thematised in relation to the structured elements of music is a fundamental part of this relationship. But what Hegarty means when he suggests that it makes sense to speak of noise music as a genre since the advent of Japanoise is that "there is, if you like, more noise in Japanese noise music, whether in terms of volume, distortion, non-musicality, non-musical elements, music against

music and meaning" (*Noise/Music* 133). Here, Hegarty captures the dominant motif in the discourse of noise music: wherever noise is, it is always the unwanted other to music and meaning and wherever it occurs it does so as a violent disruption. In its maximalist form – which involves extremely high volume, a condensed sonic space filled with static and feedback and, frequently but not essentially, a perverse aesthetic[2] – Japanoise is, for Hegarty and several other theorists, the apex of this understanding.

This essay is concerned precisely with this maximalist form of noise and what it means to write about this noise now that its transgressions have apparently hit a dead end. In 2013, John Olson from the band Wolf Eyes made this claim stating that noise, as a "genre," has "run its course" and is "completely, 100 percent" over (Preira). For the likes of Olson, noise has become a one-way conversation: it lacks the adventure from which it was supposedly born and its subversions have been normalised to the point of deadness. Olson's point resonates with something Simon Reynolds previously confronted; when noise is thought of as a monstrous "outside" leaning in and striking vicious blows to cultural and aesthetic taboos it will inevitably meet a "dead(ending) end" as tolerance for subversion hardens and audiences build a capacity to "cope with absurd levels of outrage/dissonance" (57). Beyond Olson and Reynolds, in cultural theory and philosophy there is a strong feeling that we have reached transgression fatigue, where the twentieth-century modernist idea of transgression has been fully played out. With Japanoise standing at the apex of sonic subversion, resonating at the extreme end of aesthetics, the important question left to ask is whether it is even worth thinking about this noise music at all.

So far as the present article is concerned, the answer to this question is YES but with the condition that noise music be thought against the grain of the narrative of negativity and violence that dominates its discourse. Noise music will inevitably hit this dead(ending) end if it is understood negatively (as something unwanted) and as violence (as negativity mobilised against meaning). In this understanding, the potential of noise is reduced to a framework of antagonisms and infractions which, culturally speaking, are limited. There has been some push back against this. Reynolds himself tried to emphasise the pervasive character of noise, stretching its boundaries beyond the usual pockets of guitar distortion and the "sense-dulling consistency" (ibid.) of repetitive noise forms, to the consideration of hip hop's noises, the noise of electronics and even "Barthes's 'grain'" (58). More recently, Marie Thompson (while advocating affect) acknowledges the supposed "quiet turn" in the Japanese noise scene with music like *onkyô*.[3] Her suggestion is that despite the importance of maximalist noise (what she refers to as the "full noise aesthetic") "the equation of noise music with its harshest manifestations tends to drown out the subtler practices that do not easily correspond to aesthetic and conceptual values of transgression, extremity and excess" (146–47). Thompson is right when she suggests *onkyô* does not aim to "satisfy the promise to leave minds blown and bodies shocked" (149) – a promise that is often made by practitioners and theorists of Japanoise. Nevertheless, an exploration of *onkyô*, and other practices not invested in the maximalist form of excess, still does not address the persistence of noise production in its hyperbolic form; despite the insistence of the definite/impending end, maximalist forms of noise-making show no sign of slowing down. Key figures in Japanoise, such as Masami Akita, Hiroshi Hasegawa, Mayuko Hino, Junko, Toshiji Mikawa and Maso Yamazaki, are all still actively producing noise in its maximalist form, while Stateside acts like Sunn O))) and Pharmakon continue to garner attention by producing something proximate to Japanoise. The aim of this paper, then, is not to complicate the negative and violent discourse of Japanoise by emphasising noise's

disparate qualities. Instead, the aim is to explore the apparent inertia of Japanoise by staying with its maximalist form and rethinking its "transgressive" nature.

This will be done by establishing a distinction, and exploring the relationship, between two types of noise – *active noise* and *passive noise* – with the aim of emphasising the latter. Active noise will be used to refer to the coupling of negativity and violence which are two dominant conceptual tropes found in the discourse of Japanoise. It will be shown that these tropes lean on a particular understanding of transgression that inevitably runs up against Reynolds' dead(ending) end. But, this is just one way of understanding transgression (and noise) and one that ultimately reduces the alterity of transgression to a destructive negativity. This article will show how underneath the cultural narrative of active noise resounds a deeper, more profound, a-cultural noise. Drawing on Blanchot's account of passivity, which names the anarchic region of absence in his thought, this noise will be described as passive noise. In this context, passivity must be understood differently from the conventional sense as something opposed to activity. Likewise, passive noise does not refer to background noise heard in an inactive way. Instead, passive noise will be described as the interiority of excess that manifests as a breach in the closure of active noise. This breach will be shown to be consistent with Blanchot's view of the inexhaustibility of art and will be described, specifically in the context of Japanoise, as the intimacy of excess that is the lifeblood of maximalist forms of noise-making. This will also amount to a reconsideration of the idea of transgression, with the help of Joseph Libertson's work, as Japanoise is moved away from a destructive negativity and toward an operative inertia.

active noise

The idea of active noise, as it will be developed here, is not about reducing the history of noise to its framework. In fact, such a reduction would be disingenuous. Texts like Hillel Schwartz's *Making Noise: From Babel to the Big Bang and Beyond*, Douglas Kahn's *Noise, Water, Meat* and Greg Hainge's *Noise Matters: Towards an Ontology of Noise* all capture, in their own distinct ways, the historical, cultural and ontological potential of thinking through noise. In other words, they remind us of the diversity and sheer scope of noise. Hainge's text, in particular, was the first detailed effort to think noise beyond its oppositional/relational understanding and instead in terms of ontology where noise is heard as "the irreducible expressivity of everything" (48).[4] The purpose of highlighting this category of active noise is, then, to show how discussions that have centred primarily on Japanoise (and even associated movements that are equally grounded in this maximalist aesthetic) tend to reduce noise to an assumed oppositional character. This oppositional character is what leads to the conceptual terrain of negativity and the atmosphere of violence. It is this tendency that must be unpacked for it to be displaced.

Regarding noise in opposition to something else means that noise is rarely given its own character but instead positioned against meaning and the world as something disruptive and unwanted. No more is this apparent than in the realm of aesthetics, particularly music. Here, noise is frequently understood through accounts of negativity and unwantedness. The sonic reality of noise is that of a "sound that is 'out of place'" (Hendy viii). While David Hendy's aim is to illustrate the cultural significance of noise and the virtues of thinking noise alongside music, he begins by capturing the normative understanding of noise as a sound "unwanted, inappropriate,

interfering, distracting, irritating" (ibid.) – all in opposition to music. This is the reverberation of noise's etymological heritage; deriving from the Latin *nausea*, this feeling of seasickness "captures the basic disorientation of the term" (Novak and Sakakeeny 125). Normatively speaking, this kind of definition would place noise in opposition to music. A normative (cultural) understanding of the terms would have us believe that music is characterised by musicality, which involves structure, rhythm, desirability and usually pleasure. Noise, on the other hand, captures the extra-musical; it is abrasive, dissonant and cacophonous. Hegarty articulates this idea better than anyone when he suggests that noise is defined negativity. It is always unwanted and therefore must be heard, if one is to hear it at all, "in relation to not-noise" ("Brace and Embrace" 133). The instance of negativity is not absolute but fundamentally relational.

This subversive narrative of Japanoise can be understood through the idea of *active noise*. This idea channels noise's potential for heterogeneity and multiplicity into this narrative of negativity (noise in opposition to something it is not). This negativity is often coupled with a narrative of aggression and violence. As Goodman explains: "usually noise, or disorganized sound, is conceived as a weapon, a code bomb launched by those practitioner-theorists angry at the complacency of a certain hierarchical stratification of audio-social matter" (7). While Hegarty does not necessarily emphasise the latter, preferring instead to acknowledge this violence as a signal to a more complex form of transgression, this form of violence, fuelled by a narrative of opposition, is consistent with other areas of the discourse on Japanoise. Active noise is, then, a way of accounting for both the assumed negative, cultural, content of noise *and* its apparent aggressions toward stratified culture and aesthetics.

We can think of active noise – and the narrative of disruption often associated with Japanoise – in conjunction with a modernist view of transgression. This is why Bataille is often evoked in conjunction with Japanoise, particularly as a way of understanding the relationship between the maximalist-noise of Japanoise and its early sadomasochistic aesthetic. Although Thompson is critical of this type of application, she captures the familiar reading of Bataille, as deployed in active noise, when she describes transgression as an "act" that brings the taboo "to the fore" as Japanoise looks to "'break out' of established and accepted musical orders" (139). There are certainly degrees of subtly to this expression among those who discuss it. For instance, where Hegarty claims that Japanoise artist Merzbow is the "destruction of music" he also, as Hainge explains, comes to develop a more nuanced position, where absence is emphasised over pure excess. Nevertheless, Hainge still shows how Hegarty's more nuanced articulations of absence end by claiming noise is "the exterior, the excess, the death, the catastrophe" (Hainge 270). Less subtle than Hegarty are the claims, typical in music journalism, that maximalist Japanoise is a "direct, confrontational […] full raw assault" (Newall). The most extreme version of this comes when listening to maximalist noise is likened to actual physical violence, as when Clemence writes: "The visceral excitement possible could be likened to the adrenaline rush enjoyed by extreme sports enthusiasts, or martial arts experts taking and giving a thorough beating" (85). What will be made clear in the following section is that this is, if we read Bataille as Libertson does, a reductive reading of transgression. In other words, the alterity that belongs to transgression (which, this paper argues, is best conceived through Blanchot's passivity) is reduced to an *act*: "it is the conception of alterity as power, an independence or freedom, and an effectivity – that is, as the very image of identity to self" (Libertson 24). Active noise fundamentally misses the passive nature of transgression by favouring voluntarism.

This reduces the meaning of Japanoise to opposition and activity. The noise of Japanoise is thus understood as an oppositional, unwanted and violent act that works against the privilege of meaning and acceptability. This also means that noise is liable to fail once its antagonisms are normalised.

What is important to acknowledge here is that the differentiating and amorphous nature of noise is, in the language of active noise, surrendered to the region of possibility and action that informs an ecstatic promise. The term "active" captures this agency that belongs to possibility. Possibility, as Blanchot conceives it, is futural; it is our ability to act in a modality of being "that is fixed toward the future" (IC 44). Noise's possibility, according to the language of active noise, is its power to disturb, disrupt and ultimately destroy music. Japanoise is said to be fuelled by the hope that it might smash the rigidity of musicality creating an ecstatic, sonic, disembodiment. The manifestation of this hope is frequently described as "destructive" and "ruthless" (Masters) where the loud frequencies pierce our ears like "shards of glass" (Voegelin 67). It seems, then, that according to the narrative of noise that makes up active noise negativity is conjoined with violence which leads to a promise of ecstasy: "noise is imagined to be ear-splitting, excessive, extreme, overwhelming, sublime, transgressive [in the reductive sense] and revolutionary. It leaves minds blown and bodies shocked" (Thompson 128). Novak explains this in relation to Osaka-based noise artist Masonna: "Masonna's performance forces listeners to check themselves, to feel the limits of their physical reaction: 'How long can I take this? Am I enjoying this feeling? Is this what I'm supposed to feel?'" (45). He goes on to recount a friend's description of how the loudness, of the likes of Masonna, works:

> the volume "just sucks all the air out of the room," leaving the listener suspended in sound: "You can feel your whole body react [he snapped his head back as if suddenly startled] when they start – the sound fills your mind completely and you can't think. At first you're just shrinking back, until you overcome that and let it go, and then you're in it and just blown away." (46)

To reiterate, then, there are two crucial themes in the discourses accompanying Japanoise and that make up the category of active noise. These themes must be understood if we are to confront the idea that Japanoise might be over. Firstly, noise is understood predominantly negatively. Its economy is said to be other to that of music and when put to work it operates as a radical destruction of music. Secondly, this negativity is often framed through a narrative of violence and aggression which equally manifests for some listeners as an ecstatic feeling of disembodiment. Here, one can think of Voegelin's account of listening to Merzbow, where she claims to become a "noisy thing myself" exceeding a "material objectivity" and living in the "dense ephemerality of sound as itself" (67–68). The capacity of Japanoise to do all of this and the longevity of it as a subversive force are precisely what this discourse (active noise) is concerned with.

It would be naive and disingenuous to imply that active noise does not tell us something about Japanoise and even affiliated practices like power electronics. As I have discussed elsewhere, extremity and its associated transgressive content (in its reductive forms) have been a vital part of the history of Japanoise (Potts 381). Also, as Daniel Wilson has discussed more recently, outfits like Whitehouse have a vested interest in noise because of its apparent potential to destroy and dominate; they "inflict themselves and their music upon the audience, seeking to dominate them in a

totalitarian manner" (119). This raises complex questions about the fascistic potential of noise[5] but for now what is important is recognising this *will* to destroy. What this article has referred to as a reductive understanding of transgressive is therefore a fundamental part of Japanoise and noise musics more broadly and active noise is, in part, a theorisation of this overtly transgressive content.

The problem, it seems, is what happens when noise (and with it, Japanoise) becomes normalised. What happens when noise ceases to be subversive? What happens to noise when its destructive exigency is weakened as it becomes all too familiar? If the understanding of Japanoise by what has been referred to as active noise is correct, and Japanoise is anchored by an economy of negativity and an energy of wilful destruction, then the whole thing comes crashing down once our tolerance hardens. If one holds to the conceptual values of active noise then Japanoise must be said to be either dead in the water or slowly dying. Any sonic practice that is said to be aiming to destroy music will become tiresome and predictable for those familiar with it, retaining a shock value for the uninitiated based solely on novelty. This may be the case but it is reductive to think that the persistence of Japanoise today – and the continued interest in maximalist noise sound by its founders such as Merzbow, Incapacitants, Astro – is at best simply relying on novelty and at worst a zombiefied version of itself. This type of judgement is also dependent on the discourse of active noise being correct. It prevents one from thinking that perhaps this continued interest in this sound is a principled commitment driven by something other than wilful destruction.

If one listens to Japanoise with Blanchot – which involves drawing on his account of literature and art by appealing to the sonic metaphors within and the direct references to music – one gets the sense of a different kind of force at work than the kind reducible to dialectical thinking. Listening alongside Blanchot means that the transgressive potential of noise must be understood as an anterior dispossession unassimilable to the operations of power. For Blanchot, the experience of art, and the demand it places on thought during this experience, emanates from this mysterious, fractious, region – one that does not "necessarily satisfy the concepts of unity, totality, or continuity" (IC 348). Art interrupts in a manner far more dramatic than its cultural distortions. Put simply, when Blanchot's understanding of art is directed toward Japanoise it indicates that there is a noise not even reducible to activity and power as it occupies a subterranean space beneath culture that is both the condition of its worldly manifestation but also its unravelling. This region is characterised by *passive noise*.

transgression as passivity

Before explaining the idea of passive noise, it is necessary to understand the role that absence and passivity play in Blanchot's thought and why this is relevant to Japanoise. One way in to the significance of this relation is Libertson's unique reading of Bataille's transgression. The way Libertson understands transgression places Bataille, and the subversive content typically associated with him, in proximity with Blanchot. He demonstrates how, far from referring to extreme activity, transgression is in fact intimate with ideas more readily associated with Blanchot. Now that the modernist idea of transgression, encapsulated by active noise, has been explained and its problems highlighted, following the Libertsonian–Bataillean view of transgression

as a way into Blanchot will help leave behind the baggage of transgression and enable an approach to noise in terms of passivity and intimacy.

Libertson believes there is an adjustment in Bataille's work, from his early texts to his later texts, that marks a shift from transgression-as-voluntarism to transgression-as-intimacy. In Bataille's early work Libertson identifies a dualistic tendency where "a heterogeneous instance which defies totalization" is privileged "over a relatively submissive or servile 'world' of totalization" (12). The duality regularly held in active noise (between meaning, music and the world on the one hand, and interruption, noise and chaos on the other) comes out of this very dualism. What follows is typically an affirmation of damaged aesthetics, where activities drawn from this heterogeneous place are regarded as instances of defiance and rebellion. In Bataille, this is represented in readings of his work that take the perverse sexual acts, surrealist body poetry and human sacrifice at face value. However, beginning with the publication of *Inner Experience* and later in texts like *Eroticism*, Libertson suggests that the heterogeneous becomes less about voluntarism and liberation as this form is slowly "supplanted by heterogeneity as a synonym for discontinuity of closure" (13). This relates to an ontological idea of sorts in its consistency with Blanchot where the very idea of ontology, as "ontological positivity," is regarded as "problematic" (ibid.). In these later works, Bataille explains how what "one calls 'being' is never simple, and if it is a durable unity, it only possesses this unity imperfectly." Bataille's point is that what we call being is constituted by an excess that, as well as constituting being, equally disrupts the closure of subjectivity: being is "disturbed by its profound interior division, it remains poorly closed, at certain points vulnerable to the exterior" (ibid.). In other words, the conceptual value of transgression and its mobilisation in action, reifies and domesticates its true alterity (22–23). As Libertson understands it, transgression is not about action or freedom but relates to one's exposure to an anterior excess that constitutes our very being as a kind of disruption. It relates not to intentional, cultural, activities but our intimacy with something that brings our very sense of self into question. In other words, transgression is an impossibility (unassimilable to the region of power and mastery) best understood as a non-phenomenal encounter (as our familiar grip on the world gives way in such an encounter).

It is not easy to understand Bataille this way. As Libertson acknowledges, there are countless sentences that might be quoted to justify the Bataille of destructive negativity. This is partly because Bataille is inconsistent and also because of the conspicuous nature of his often violent and erotic prose; the baseness of his base materialism readily supersedes the version of transgression Libertson attends to. The prominence of such features does invite reductive and repetitive readings in the sense that any application of this version will meet Reynolds' dead end, resulting in cliché and childish antagonisms. Even if these accounts recognise the impossibility of shattering the taboo, they fail to capture the imminence of this impossibly to subjectivity. In other words, it is very difficult to save Bataille not only from such readings but from himself. Therefore, it makes sense to understand transgression (and, by extension, things like Japanoise) in the context of Blanchot's account of being. The chance of regarding the world or being from an impossible, non-phenomenal site is the basis of Blanchot's writing on art. It requires a shift from activity, power and possibility to passivity, powerlessness and impossibility. This shift prolongs the life of transgression but more importantly for this study – as this study is not simply about transgression but the type of aesthetic that comes with it, namely Japanoise – shifting away from activity to passivity breathes new life into the discourse of Japanoise.

Blanchot's account of being can only be understood by grappling with his epistemological views (if one can think of his work in this way) which involve his account of language. His epistemology is characterised by a paradoxical demand that similarly characterises this Libertsonian-Batailleanism. It is not simply a matter of distinguishing between what we can and cannot know or what is meaningful and what is not; nor is it a matter of outlining the faculties of knowledge. Knowledge and the unknowable do not exist in comfortable separation. Instead, knowledge is an interiority/presence/world whose closure is characterised by an excess. In other words, the fundamental condition of knowledge, its very possibility, is that of ruin. This simultaneity of creation and destruction is the terror of language that, as Thomas Wall explains in a similar way to Libertson, manages to "tear itself apart from the moment it begins to speak" (65). However, this terror does not reduce Blanchot to quietism or irrationalism. This much he makes clear in his essay "Knowledge of the Unknown," where he suggests that to refer to this region of excess as irrational "would be saying very little" because we are quite simply "past the point of reducing philosophy to reason, or reason to itself" (IC 49). Language – which would even include a narrative of irrationalism – is already fraught with something indeterminable. This is because language is antecedent to the world, meaning the world is given by a language that either misses the singularity of experience (in which case an absent singularity haunts the space of language thereafter) or it pursues this singularity of experience by expressions of multiplicity, ambiguity and fragmentation. In both cases, a double play is at work in language where what is given is announced because of a reality that, in part, withdraws. This is why literature is so significant to Blanchot. Bataille likewise emphasises literature and poetry but he looks to bodily penetration as an effort to awaken this internal excess. For Blanchot, however, literature is itself the key. The very distance that constitutes language is amplified by a fictitious and poetic world that does not carry the burden of representation or clarity. In other words, literature draws us to the space of excess that characterises his account of subjectivity only to collapse in the final moment.

This is readily seen in works like *The Space of Literature* and *The Infinite Conversation* – texts that circle this double play and equally texts in search of how language might account for the very thing that tears it apart. In everyday language, the distance between the concept and the object in the world is precisely what allows us to speak. Distance is operational and manageable, or more accurately, distance is necessary. Everyday language safeguards subjectivity against difference and singularity by using commonplaces as it drives toward clarity; it is the language of the same as it negotiates the distance given through ambiguity and rumour. Literary language, by contrast, does not give us the world. It amplifies the "manifest concealment" (SL 196) that is the condition of all language and the world. Not only does literature attempt this, but Blanchot's own work becomes the object of analysis. The difficulty of grasping something like *The Infinite Conversation* is not so much the idea that the world is given at a distance – that language leaves behind the specific/immediate to enable us to mediate experience and communicate – it is the fact that this distance, which can never be closed or owned and is fundamentally neutral in terms of any dialectical movement, begins to occupy the space of the text. In this regard, as Gerald Bruns suggests, Blanchot's work can be understood as a refusal of philosophy if philosophy is understood as "the guardian of rationality" (xv).

However, Blanchot does not engineer its refusal just like transgression is not an intentional movement; impossibility announces itself in being and thought as an unassimilable force. For Blanchot, this is why philosophy and literature fold into one

another. It is not, as Blanchot explains, the case that impossibility is a privileged/exceptional experience but rather it is "behind each one [experience] and as though its other dimension" (IC 45). Language that attends to this other dimension (literary language in particular) – a dimension that reveals itself because of chance; one cannot instigate its arrival – announces itself "according to a measure other than that of power" (43), other than the language of not only "traditional" philosophy but also culture. Blanchot's writing is, therefore, an affirmation of a curious sort as it circles a space of withdrawal, one that is neutral in terms of ownership and one that grows increasingly distant the more one approaches. As he explains, in this writing one does not apprehend "from a distance" but rather one is "apprehended by this distance, invested by it and invested with it" (30).

Libertson explains that "the 'too much' of Bataillean excess ('All that is … is too much.') is the 'too close' of exteriority: its excess over the possibility of phenomenality" (20). However, while one has to fight to locate this idea in Bataille, it is seen more readily in Blanchot; exteriority (which goes by names like alterity, the Other, the outside) is always too close in Blanchot because it is the very thing that allows us to speak and gives us the world but is likewise the imminence of disaster. Literature and art are so significant for Blanchot because they come from this other side of possibility: the work of art is "turned toward the elemental deep, toward that element which would seem to be the depth and shadow of the elemental" (SL 224). Without the burden of representation or the demand of clarity, the region of literature and art carry a demand greater than meaning. They have the capacity to pull us toward an amorphous space where the very idea of a work of art, a subject who experiences that work and even the platform, given by the world, to experience this work are purged. This is the infinite demand of art (infinite because it is inexhaustible) that is in excess of the subject's capacity to master any reconciliation and fundamentally any action. What remains is an encounter that exceeds our capacity to think or control. It is in this region, one best understood through the idea of passivity, where Japanoise must be thought/heard.

passive noise

The significance of Libertson's reading of Bataille's transgression is the way he locates the alterity that transgression advances toward as an antecedent condition of the world and being. This is captured in Blanchot as an absence that re-emerges as a silent displacement of meaning and certainty. The crucial thing to note here is that Libertson helps us to do away with the duality of a restricted and general economy by positioning the latter as a breach/contamination within the former. Likewise, regarding passivity, it is important to keep in mind that Blanchot is not referring to the opposite of activity. Like many terms in Blanchot's writing, passivity should not be taken in the conventional version of the term.

There is an indication of how something like "passivity" might help us understand supposedly violent music in Blanchot's essay "Ars Nova." The need for chaos can be defined as anarchy but, according to Bruns, Blanchot's interest in the avant-garde appeals to a different mode of anarchy. In "Ars Nova" Blanchot defends atonal music (and, by extension, literature and non-figurative art) by emphasising not its supposed reactionary anti-culturalism but its a-cultural part – that frightening aspect of art composed of "the infinite exigency to which artistic experience requires us to respond" (IC 348). Blanchot tells us how Thomas Mann, in his text *Doctor*

Faustus, writes in condemnation of atonal music for fear of its primitivism and immanent threat to culture, a charge commensurate with reactionary art. Mann's judgement is from "a man of culture" who fears the abstractness of atonal music because it houses something "foreign to all culture." Mann protects himself against the "a-cultural part of literature and of art to which one does not accommodate oneself easily, or happily" (346). But Mann's mistake is to conflate this a-cultural part with a regressive anti-culturalism. This is why Blanchot asks for prudence when we hear terms like barbaric and primitive in the context of atonal music and non-figurative art. In terms of atonal music, the composer's efforts to "disavow the idea of a natural aesthetics (according to which sounds or any particular system of sounds would in and of themselves have signification and value)" (ibid.) runs contrary to anything that could be defined as barbaric or primitive in the violent sense of the terms. What is barbaric about this art is not, then, any kind of wilful destruction of the past. Blanchot describes the barbaric as

> everything that ought to keep it from being taken as such: its critical force, its refusal to accept as eternally valid the worn-out forms of culture, and above all its violent intention to empty natural sonorous material of any prior meaning, and even to keep it empty and open to meaning yet to come. (347)

The barbaric is, therefore, neutral in its refusal and neutral compared to what is usually interpreted as a destructive effort sharpened against cultural forms. This is crucial to understanding Blanchot's attraction to certain art and even his own thought. Bruns captures this with the concept of anarchy, a term that bears a certain likeness to barbarism. Anarchy is a way of understanding Blanchot's conception of literature and art, and even Blanchot's own position in relation to philosophy. Like barbarism, it must be understood in an alternative, and Bruns suggests, more originary form. It does not name a chaotic, destructive will but "that which is outside, on the hither side, of the concept of principle: *an-arche*" (Bruns 6). What is most significant about this region is that it is not opposed to culture in a dialectical way. It occupies a neutral space that falls outside of categories of identity and difference and cannot be conceived by activity or categories of power.

If one considers all of this in the context of Japanoise, one's understanding of this music will begin to take a different direction from that enforced by active noise. As Blanchot suggests in reference to atonal music, the difference amounts to whether

> it appears as a renouncing of the act of composing, that is, an aggressive imitation of a pre-musical language […] or, on the contrary, as the seeking of a new form of writing that would render the finished work problematic. (IC 348)

The choice, it seems for Blanchot, is about whether this music is attempting a radical break from the past in the hope of the new or whether it aims for a point outside of culture and history. This first approach, characterised by renunciation, is similar to the understanding of Japanoise in active noise, where Japanoise is said to renounce music by embodying the non-musical-unwantedness of noise to an excessive, "transgressive" level. In this view, the emphasis on negativity and violence culminates in an inevitable failure caused by assimilation. This means Japanoise loses its power to destroy but nevertheless lives on this failure, either unaware of the problem or in a bull-headed zombie form. In the latter interpretation, however, the destructive,

barbaric and anarchic nature of Japanoise would be related to its problematic ontology, one haunted by an excess that already refuses those worn-out forms of culture such as noise as unwantedness. Understanding Japanoise this way would mean that the actual material instance of Japanoise is nothing but a reminder of sorts of that a-cultural excess that refuses narrative history. This means that rather than understand Japanoise as negativity and violence, one appeals to its capacity to hollow-out sonic materials, rendering the very notion of what it *is* uncertain. This would be listening to Japanoise in line with Blanchot's view of the work, which "brings neither certainty nor clarity […] it does not furnish us with anything indestructible or indubitable upon which to brace ourselves" (SL 223).

To understand this, it is important to think back to Blanchot's account of language and the significance of literature. Language is antecedent to the world, for Blanchot. Language is the manifest condition of the world. But language only does this by taking the place of the object it refers to. As Wall states, referring specifically to writing, "Writing takes the place of the real in order to say it" (65). In this way, language replaces the singularity of objects by a network of commonplaces that marks experience in its generalised form. This allows us to give expression to our experiences but only through a simultaneous annihilation in which the world as a singularity is *seemingly* left behind but *in fact* persists as a disruptive absence. This absent world – the dark subterranean space of singularity – is simultaneously the foundation of language as well as the absence that haunts language and hollows it out. The world, then, is represented in language by an absence or death that resonates from within. This is, as Allan Stoekl explains, the instantaneous and incessant coupling of life and death, "creation and annihilation," that refuses any "mediation through time" (49). Literature and poetry are so significant for Blanchot because they turn toward this hollowed space and away from the practicalities of meaning. This is what Blanchot means when he suggests that the work "designates a region where impossibility is no longer deprivation, but affirmation" (SL 223). However, this is not just isolated to literature and poetry. Blanchot recognises it in other art forms too, like non-figurative art. What is clear in essays like "Ars Nova" is that this is also true of certain music, such as atonal music, that reaches for sonic expression away from its signifying, cultural symbols. Of course, this effort is precisely the paradoxical demand of these art forms and the very thing Blanchot is drawn to. What they seek is their origin but their origin can never be found, despite being immediate to the experience of the work itself.

This is the region of the anarchic and it must, because of its refusal of dialectics, be understood as passive. Like many terms in Blanchot's writings – such as the barbaric and anarchic – there is a conceptual echo where the demand of the term is amplified. Blanchot describes passivity as a "passion more passive than any passivity" (SNB 118). The idea that this passivity is *more* passive captures the conceptual echo/amplification that pushes this particular idea of passivity beyond the conventional understanding of the active and passive. However, this is more than just a conceptual play. It makes both an epistemological and ontological demand. This passivity more passive than passivity captures the inert temporality found in the emptied centre of the work of art. In this dark subterranean space – which literature, poetry, non-figurative art, atonal music and Japanoise draw us toward – the identity of the personal self and the authority of language as it lords over the world and the alterity within it is driven to its limit and exceeded in an encounter that can only be described as a non-experience (as the subject of experience has been emptied). This can be thought, perhaps more simply, as a phenomenological pause or suspension

where one's ability to act/not act (captured most vividly in the power of negation and its capacity for assimilation) is lost, where the familiarity of the world slips into the darkness of the night and where the absence at the heart of language lurches forward. This space is passive, then, not because it is opposed to mobility, activity and action. It is passive in an originary sense, as it directs us to a region where the very idea of subjectivity (which encompasses the categories of activity and inactivity) is suspended. As Libertson explains, the work of art does not "change the world, as does an action rooted in the negative. Instead, it reveals the paradoxical and contaminated subsistence of a world underneath negation" (70). This contaminated subsistence is the simultaneity of creation and destruction at the heart of language that gives us the world. What remains is a subject, object, event that is, as Hill explains, "neither properly present nor properly absent" (131) but, instead, wholly and utterly passive.

The challenge of writing about passivity – and this is a challenge Blanchot ruminates on in almost all his works – is that it involves trying to capture what is left when conventional modes of understanding the self, the world and experience, have been traversed. At this point, one cannot resort to familiar cultural or historical concepts. What is affirmed is simply "the impersonal, anonymous affirmation that it is – and nothing more" (SL 23), which echoes Levinas's account of the *il y a*: the simple "there is" of existence where the "is" no longer makes way for a particular quality. The *il y a* is thus fundamentally paradoxical in nature. In Levinas's words, it is "neither being nor nothingness" (*Ethics and Infinity* 50). It is a way of thinking disappearance/absence as it lurches forward in a kind of undeniable presence.

In Blanchot's writings this region is often described sonically and this is why passive noise has been chosen as a category to at once describe this region and also reframe the exigency of Japanoise. The inert world of which language is but an image is described by Blanchot as a "giant murmuring" (SL 27). Like a sound in the dark that has no discernible source but that nevertheless comes from something, the murmur is the sound of a curious kind of presence. The very absence at the heart of language, then, can be thought sonically as a murmur or noise sounding beneath signification. This is what Blanchot means when he writes "The word, *almost* deprived of sense, is noisy" (WD 52). This noise is different from the noise of active noise; it is not disruptive in a dialectical sense. The noise that Blanchot refers to retains its etymological heritage (noise coming from nausea) but in a more radical form. Levinas's account of nausea in *On Escape* is a useful reference to understand this difference. When Levinas writes about the *il y a* in this text, he draws on the experience of nausea. As Jacques Rolland explains, we have a feeling of nausea when thinking the *il y a* because, like the feeling of seasickness, we are similarly at sea in the *there is* of being. We are, as it were, "off the coast," we have lost sight of meaning. More dramatically, "the earth has gone, the same earth into which, ordinarily, we sink our feet in order, in this position or stance, to exist" (*On Escape* 17). Nausea, for Levinas, is more than just a feeling of sickness; it is the unmooring of the subject from the world. It is this nausea that informs the disruptive quality of Blanchot's noise. This is why this noise is best understood as passive; passive noise is the resonance of what is left when the earth has gone. It is the sound of impersonal, anonymous, being. As William Large explains, behind one's words is a constant noise "which my speech interrupts momentarily, but falls back into as soon as it is silent" (97). This noise, then, lies at the heart of the work of art. It is the noise that is left once the work has been emptied of meaning. Or, in other words, the noise that lies beyond the limit of meaning. Passive noise is the sound that emanates from the opening in the

work and, in the context of Japanoise, it results in the doubling back of noise where its negativity and violence is deprived of sense.

While the difference between active noise and passive noise should be clear, these regions of noise should not be thought in opposition to one another. If they were thought in opposition then passive noise would simply be dialectical when, in truth, it is anarchic. If active noise names the worldly actualisations of noise (captured by the oppositional force of negativity and a violent energy) then passive noise must be thought as its inexhaustible source that manifests as an excess or failure of the active (and dialectical thinking). Libertson suggests that transgression "insists in the *arrière-monde* of impossibility as a permanent and irreducible dimension of subjectivity's appearance in the general economy." He adds, "transgression is real without being actual" (64). Passive noise can be understood in these terms. It is impossible in the sense of being irreducible to categories of meaning all the while contaminating and haunting the activities of Japanoise. The reality of passive noise is not heard but subsists as a breach in closure that disrupts the conceptual values of active noise. Passive noise is, therefore, both the life and death of active noise.

non-experience of passivity

To suggest that passivity is a reality without actuality is crucial to understanding what passive noise means in terms of both the practice of Japanoise and the listening experience. Although active noise has been shown to be reductive, it is still an important category because it tells us something about the collective imagination of Japanoise. If passive noise is going to "mean" anything at all, it has to "say" something about the material reality of Japanoise. We have already seen that rather than think the differential nature of noise in terms of opposition and as a power to escape boundaries, the aim is to think noise as an ontological imminence that is equally constitutive of being as it is disruptive. This means that the heterogeneous quality of noise is not measurable by the activities of Japanoise practitioners. In fact, Blanchot would go so far as to say that the activities of Japanoise prove "insufficient at the decisive hours" (SL 213). But if the demand of art is more important than the actual artist and his/her activities, and if the alterity of noise is more than its cultural iterations and expressions, can one even speak of it in terms of experience?

The point, for Blanchot, is to regard experience cautiously because in the encounter with the work of art the experience is impersonal, making it *impossible* for the "subject." But, and this is crucial, this impossibility must be regarded affirmatively. To understand this, the idea of insufficiency needs to be carefully understood to avoid suggesting that the actual composition and activities of Japanoise are inconsequential. When Blanchot suggests that artistic activity is insufficient, he is referring to its insufficiency as an explanation of the work. However, there is an opportunity to understand this insufficiency as a way of unpacking the affirmative nature of impossibility. Bataille's idea of the "principle of insufficiency" (172) is relevant here. For Bataille, no being is ever complete or sufficient. This insufficiency should be regarded as a chasm at the root of being that, crucially, leaves it open to the other. This means that being proceeds by way of the other as a perpetual opening. As Christopher Germerchak sees it, the principle of insufficiency also relates to the idea that the meaning of being is only significant when it proceeds by putting itself at risk (4). If one were to mistake this insufficiency for something belonging to the region of active noise, one might say that the openness relates to the genre's apparent

unpredictability proceeding along the precipice of anticipation. However, this understanding makes the openness of insufficiency susceptible to the nullifying consequences of familiarity. Insufficiency, understood in line with passivity, would mean that Japanoise attempts to circumscribe "an affirmation of impossibility" away from cultural opposition and "appropriating comprehension." The material instance of Japanoise, understood in this way, is nothing other than an impassioned gesture to "the Outside itself" (IC 51) but one that is fundamentally fraught because of the *arrière-monde* of impossibility that characterises this insufficiency.

Arguably, this is why Hiroshi Hasegawa (founding member of C.C.C.C. – one of the early instigators of Japanoise) emphasises the nothingness at the heart of Japanoise. In *Japanese Independent Music*, Monia De Lauretis asks a number of Japan's independent musicians (which includes many Japanoise artists like Hasegawa) questions about their practice and its origin. Questions include: "What are the bands, the artists, the cultures and the myths coming from the States and Europe that most influenced Japanese independent music?"; "In your opinion, what are the aspects of Japanese independent music that characterize its absolute diversity from American and European styles?"; "In which way does the different 'cultural' background have an influence on its originality?"; "In your point of view, which is the characteristic or the 'attitude' that makes Japanese independent music so fascinating and original in your eyes?" In response to every question, as if speaking on behalf of Japanoise, Hasegawa responds: "nothing"; "nothing"; "nothing"; "nothing" (De Lauretis 46–54). It might be that Hasegawa was indifferent to the line of questioning or that he feels, culturally, there is nothing special about Japanoise's noise. Or, it might be that Hasegawa is pointing to this very insufficiency, to the a-cultural part, refusing, as Blanchot says of atonal music, "to accept as eternally valid the worn-out forms of culture" (IC 347) while also refusing to acknowledge the material actualisations of noise as the absolute reality of noise. Where Blanchot suggests "Whoever wants to make it [the work of art] express more finds nothing, finds that it expresses nothing" (SL 22), Hasegawa may similarly be pointing to that passive region where noise, rather than be reduced to a narrative of modernist transgression and cultural taboo, cannot express anything for certain as it is held empty and open to meaning yet to come. Although it would be a stretch to suggest Hasegawa is explicitly thinking of Blanchot, the emphasis given to nothingness does indicate the importance of absence to Japanoise. This absence or insufficiency reframes Japanoise as a practice that looks to withdraw from the world, into Hasegawa's *nothing*, precisely because it resonates from this nothing. A further comparison can be made to Blanchot's "Ars Nova," where he writes of German painters who looked to "assign to the plastic arts and the task of seeking a field or surface without privilege, one setting forth no possibility of orientation and realizing itself through movements whose areas would all have equal value" (IC 350).

In terms of the actual practices of Japanoise, then, passive noise resists any effort to unleash it but its insistence, as a contamination or breach in the discourse of noise, nevertheless invites effort. However, passivity names exactly that which cannot be brought into action; it names the anarchic region that lurks on the other side of power. Its force or insistence is, nevertheless, felt as the inexhaustibility of noise. At best then, the activities of the noise artist recall and remind us of this antecedent region, rather than instigate something that would only ever be an abated version of excess.

A commitment to this idea of passivity means that listening must likewise be understood on these terms. As something that is real but not actual, we might say that

passive noise is imagined in the experience of listening when listening becomes fascinated. In place of the narrative of masochism and ecstatic listening, fascinated listening "robs us of the power to give it sense" (SL 32). For Blanchot, fascination involves a surrender to time's absence. He describes it as seeing but as "*contact* at distance" (ibid.). When Thomas, in *Thomas the Obscure*, reads in a kind of trance he is engaged in the experience of fascination: he loses his sense of self and his conceptual values to what can only be described as an impersonal experience. Likewise, fascinated listening is impersonal and trance-like; it occurs when one feels intimate not with the sound itself but the absence/uncertainty upon which it is grounded. This should not be confused with immersion or ecstasy. Fascinated listening is less psychedelic as it is closer to the disaster. In fascinated listening, one does not "perceive any real object [or sound], any real figure, for what he sees [hears] does not belong to the world of reality" (ibid.). Japanoise is not special in its capacity to do this. This much is clear in Blanchot's take on atonal music. But it does belong to those types of art that look to awaken something uncharacterisable. In its prolonging of time by its refusal of rhythmic structures and its resistance to melody that would punctuate our listening, Japanoise can certainly be heard as an attempt to awaken the indeterminable. The failure to actualise this moment has already been discussed in terms of impossibility. The point is rather that somewhere between the attempt to awaken this original, passive, region of noise and the imperfect, failed, material sonic instance of the noise we hear, listening has the potential to become fascinated.

a commitment to passivity

This article has tried to listen to Japanoise with Blanchot. The result is that rather than hear the persistence of this maximalist form of Japanoise as a dead end, and rather than think around it, we can recognise the disarming potential in this noise by making a commitment to passivity like Blanchot's character Thomas: "I commit myself to passivity which, rather than diminish me, makes me real" (TO 121). A commitment to passivity demands that the idea of inertia be rethought and the apparent inertia of maximalist forms of noise-making along with it. In her essay "Midnight, or the Inertia of Being," Eleanor Kaufman suggests that while Blanchot's thought often circles, in a deliberately repetitive way, the strange temporality of becoming, it also approaches the dissolution of becoming through inertia. What is so radical about this idea is its significance to the work of art. Kaufman suggests that behind the movement of becoming is a mysterious persistence of nothingness and lack of movement. This nothingness takes on the character of plenitude (i.e. it supplants), making the "it is" of the work unstable because its presence is one of absence. What insists, then, in the atemporality of inertia is a "thereness [that] is hard to fathom" (102). Once committed to the idea of passivity, one must interpret the inertia of Japanoise in this way. It is undeniable that Japanoise is experiencing a kind of inertia: the commitment to hyperbolic forms of noise shows no sign of slowing down whilst the founding figures of Japanoise are as central to its practice as they ever were. If committed to the idea of passivity, we can say that this inertia occurs not because Japanoise is a dead sonic form living a zombie-like existence but because the *thereness* of this noise originates from an inexhaustible, passive space that insists as the breach in the moment of closure. Put simply, maximalist forms of Japanoise persist because what they are is radically undecided. The indeterminable breach, that is the intimacy of excess, is the

lifeblood of Japanoise that both constitutes the possibility of noise as well as the impossibility of its dead(ending) end.

disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

notes

1 There is something inherently absurd about trying to describe music that invites misunderstanding and whose discourse is centred on the issue of definition. There is something doubly absurd about trying to describe this music when the aim of this article is to problematise, even further, the issues raised by various theorists in that discourse. With this in mind, there are a few general and mundane things that can be said. Japanoise artists use "noise" sounds instead of "musical sounds." They use white noise, static and feedback in place of instrumentation, melody and rhythm. It is often played loudly. It has no clear structure. The majority of Japanoise compositions are one continuous sound, with various textures and inflections making slight alterations. All of this is contentious. All of this invites debate.

2 Early incarnations of Japanoise, particularly the early work of Merzbow, married the extreme noise levels with a Sadean–Bataillean aesthetic. Album imagery often consisted of violent sexual imagery, bondage and death.

3 *Onkyô* is a free improvisation movement that emerged in the late 1990s in Japan which emphasised minimalism and quiet noise by combining elements of techno, noise and electronic music. In opposition to the maximalist form of noise, *onkyô* works toward an almost complete abolition of sound bordering on a Cagean silence. It favours sonic blips and glitches that punctuate the sounds of environmental space.

4 There are similarities between Hainge's argument and my own, particularly the effort to think noise as "the incommensurability of identity" (Hainge 48). The difference, it seems, is a matter of neutrality. Whereas Hainge thinks in terms of ontology, the idea of ontological positivity for Blanchot, and by extension this idea of passive noise, is problematic.

5 Hegarty addresses this issue in *Noise/Music*. He claims that noise cannot carry content which means it cannot overtly be fascistic (124). Of course, many noise and industrial acts have an interest in fascistic imagery. Whether the aim is just to offend by engaging with every cultural taboo imaginable, or whether it represents an actual ideology, can only be presumed. Noise, beyond this presumed content, cannot in itself be fascistic.

abbreviations

IC *The Infinite Conversation*.
SL *The Space of Literature*.

SNB *The Step Not Beyond*.
TO *Thomas the Obscure*.
WD *The Writing of Disaster*.

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